

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 28, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, Southwest  
Washington, DC 20250-1590

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Congress has dedicated billions of dollars to bring broadband service to all Americans. Yet today, there remain some Americans - largely in remote and very rural parts of America - that lack access to broadband service. We are writing today to ask you to continue to prioritize these Americans as you grant funding under the Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) Rural eConnectivity Pilot Program (ReConnect). Focusing the third round of ReConnect funding on truly unserved areas would make the program more effective and lead to far more meaningful progress in bringing broadband to Americans who remain unconnected.

Under program rules, ReConnect awards are only allowed in unserved areas where at least 90 percent of households do not have access to broadband. Adjusting the definition of what is considered "unserved" from the first two rounds must be done carefully to target funds to where they are needed most and to avoid setting standards that conflict with other federal broadband deployment programs. While the unserved standards may need to increase as more unserved areas become served, it is important to note every round of ReConnect funding made available thus far has been oversubscribed with far more applicants than actual funding available, meaning there are still many areas that are unserved at the current definition and in need of help.

A decreased focus on targeting funds to areas most in need could lead to significant government-subsidized overbuilding of existing broadband infrastructure—some of which is itself subsidized by other programs. Therefore, as RUS implements the third round and any additional rounds of ReConnect funding, we ask you to ensure that projects in areas with higher percentages of unserved households receive maximum priority over all other proposals. If unserved areas are not adequately prioritized, the program may fail to achieve the goal of reaching rural communities and closing the digital divide.

Identifying unserved areas is also critical to avoid wasteful spending in areas already served or planned to be served by private investment or other federal and state broadband programs. We strongly encourage you to increase your coordination efforts with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Department of Treasury, and any other agencies administering broadband programs. To ensure the greatest impact of these funds and to avoid overbuilding, government agencies that award broadband funding, including RUS, should take data maintained by other agencies into account in making awards, in addition to continuing your own significant "on-the-ground" efforts to verify broadband coverage.


Additionally, the potential for overbuilding may be increased when RUS does not consider pending FCC auction winners. The FCC engages in a final review of providers after its auctions to ensure that they will be able to meet their deployment obligations, a process designed to help avoid waste, fraud, and abuse. We would ask that you coordinate closely with the FCC on the status of those reviews and take into account any information it can provide to RUS with respect to the status of FCC auction applications as ReConnect awards are considered in a given area.

Finally, the ReConnect program has given all types of broadband providers the opportunity to participate equally in the competitive grant program. As long as providers have met the objective technical, financial, and operational standards set by RUS, any provider could participate on equal footing with their counterparts in the industry. USDA should continue to look to providers of all kinds, provided they meet the criteria for program participation and awards.


USDA has been given a tremendous responsibility to disburse funding that can improve broadband access in rural America. We ask you to take every possible step to make the greatest possible use of this opportunity so that the ReConnect program can go as far as possible towards achieving our shared goal of connecting all Americans.

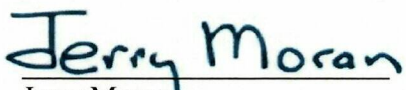
Sincerely,


  
John Thune  
United States Senator

  
Tina Smith  
United States Senator

  
Roger F. Wicker  
United States Senator

  
Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator

  
Jerry Moran  
United States Senator

  
John Hickenlooper  
United States Senator